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ABSTRACT

An interesting area of adult development is "gender shift": the transition from the traditional life patterns or ways of making meaning that are associated with stereotypically male or female roles. One may experience the wish to fulfill those parts of one's personality often associated with feminine or masculine constructs not yet explored. Educators can provide holding environments that support experimentation of options to ease the transitions experienced by adult learners, respect an individual's emerging identities, and be willing to acknowledge their own gender biases. Despite a new sense of options and choices throughout the lifespan, ample research shows that gender roles have instilled lifelong personality characteristics. New roles are developed by both older men and older women: as men age and with the passing of the "parental emergency," men become more affiliative and women become more dominant. Transitions from one role to another involve social and psychological transition. Traditional ordering must give way to longer life cycles with several sequential careers or transitions. Curriculum to support developmental mandates for women might include courses in tax returns, investments, business, and travel and for men, experiences in story-telling and history, personal development, and spiritual development. For the adult educator, the creation of a gender-neutral learning environment is essential. (Contains 23 references.) (YLB)

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Gender Shift through Adulthood:

Educational Responses to Changing Lifespan Roles

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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The idea of "development" implies an understanding that humans continue to change throughout the life cycle. Often changes are due to unfolding life events--adulthood, loss of spouse, children leaving home--and at other times to unforeseen historical events--"downsizing" of a corporation, war, shifting demographics. (Amato & Booth, 1995; Beh, 1994; Fishel & Samsa, 1993). These changes are often stressful, requiring adaptation in life structure (Levinson, 1990, 1996).

Another view of development involves intrinsic shifting in response to environmental or biological events (Gutmann, 1987; Huyck, 1994; Jung, 1933; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Levinson, 1996.) This concept implies that we have many "selves" to play out in a lifetime and that aging or natural development provide opportunities to explore other dimensions of one's personality. In any case, adulthood does not mean that one has finished developing.

One of the most interesting areas of adult development is "gender shift": the transition from traditional life patterns or ways of making meaning that are associated with stereotypically male or female roles. Does this mean that we undergo surgery to change our gender? No, it means, simply, that we may experience the wish to fulfill those parts of our personalities often associated with feminine or masculine constructs not yet explored. If, for example, a woman has been raised in a traditional household,

she may have imagined herself "at home," raising children during early adulthood, and finds that this lifestyle does not suit her personality. She may wish, instead, to try working in traditionally male domains or to restructure the family experience. A man in his fifties is often observed exploring affiliative roles traditionally held by women. This is what is meant in this chapter as "gender shift."

In what ways do educators facilitate adults' experiences of the challenge of new "personalities" related to playing out the gender shifts? Educators can provide holding environments that support experimentation of options for fulfillment, to ease the transitions experienced by adult learners. The essential ingredients are an authentic respect for an individual's emerging identities and a willingness to acknowledge their own gender biases.

Review of the Literature

Although there is a new sense of options and choices available throughout the lifespan, and many traditional gender roles are now enjoyed by both sexes, there is ample research that gender roles have instilled lifelong personality characteristics (Bee, 1996; Bem, 1974; Huyck, 1994; Turner & Turner, 1994). Feminist theorists (notably Bardwick, 1982; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991) believe that women have been socialized in adolescence to adapt to others' expectations of femininity. Turner and Turner (1994) cite "communal" (expressive) traits as feminine. They practice caretaking, always cognizant of others' affiliative demands. However, the course of development brings with it some shifting of gender roles. With midlife, for example, women often reclaim earlier characteristics

and assertiveness or, as Gilligan (1993) says, "their voices." This, she observes, is the hopeful nature of development.

Margaret Huyck (1994) found that late middle-aged women described themselves as "feminine" and nearly "half of the women described some way that they had expanded on their basic feminine gender style to include aspects that they themselves had formerly regarded as 'masculine'" (1994, p. 218):

> Younger women are seen as particularly concerned about preserving relationships and willing to trade compliance for maintenance of a valued relationship; older women are regarded as more assertive and feisty, willing to risk the rupture of a relationship in order to assert their own priorities. (p. 213)

Men, on the other hand, are seen to develop gender-related characteristics that are identified as "thinking like a man." This includes training to be autonomous, separate, competitive, rational, instrumental (agentic) (Bee, 1996, Bem, 1974). Gutmann (1987) proposes that the male characteristics are especially relevant in traditional marriages where men see themselves as concerned with economics and women see themselves as nurturers. This construct is prevalent, despite an ongoing public sense that sex-role stereotypes have become antiquated (Huyck, 1994; Levinson, 1990, 1996; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee,1978; Turner & Turner, 1994; Wethington, McLeod, & Kessler, 1987).

Researchers point to gender differences in the way adults make meaning. Williams and Best (in Bee, 1996, p. 187) state that research from 25 countries found similarities in gender roles. In analyzing how men and women experience stress,

Wethington, McLeod, & Kessler (1987) cite that women experience themselves as connected to "networks" of friends, neighbors, relatives. Losses and stress of individuals in these networks (i.e., a divorce, medical problem) have a profound effect on women's lives. In turn, women receive support from these networks when they have stressful events. Wethington, McLeod, & Kessler observe,

> Despite their involvement as helpers in a substantial minority of cases, men are apparently somehow able to avoid the personal distress that women experience from network events. One possible explanation for this male advantage is that men are less able to empathize with the distress of other people. . . we suspect that men, despite their ability to empathize, live lives that are less involved with the emotional concerns of others. (1987, p. 149)

The authors conclude that:

1. Network events have a much greater effect on women than men.
2. Sex difference in vulnerability to events is considerably more pronounced at the edges of caring networks than at their centers.
3. Women seem to cast a wider net of concern and so are affected emotionally. . .
4. Men. . .are less affected emotionally by events occurring to people outside their immediate family. (Wethington, et. al, 1987, pp. 146-151)

Gutmann (1987) suggests that new roles are developed by both older men and older women: as men age and with the passing of the "parental emergency," men become more affiliative and women become more dominant. The androgyny of earlier

life returns. Gender, in this view, is seen as related to time and place in life, and not to any innate qualities that are distributed to men or to women (Rossi, 1985).

One clear indication of gender research is that older men tend to wish to engage in affiliative and nurturing roles (Hyde, Krajnik, & Skuldt-Niederberger, 1991). When they explore esthetics, participate in discussions of family, and engage in other activities previously considered as "feminine domains," they are not losing their masculinity: they are developing the unused sides of their personalities.

And the women? Gutmann (1987) and Huyck (1994) propose that gender stereotypes are reduced in late middle age and that men and women are challenged by the benefits: some are threatened, others liberated. Women, suggests Carol Gilligan (1993), may begin to "reexperience their own voices," a process that allows them to become more authentic and less alienated.

Implications for Educators

What is extraordinary from the practitioner's perspective is the power of the interaction of the educational setting in the life of the learner. This can be observed by the practitioner and is often an undercurrent in the life of the learner. This process is the result of the object relations aspect of learning: that we tend to explore our development through a point and check process. Sometimes we are more open than at other times, and hence, the "aha" that occurs during the classroom discussion, writing or advisement that accompanies our relationships with learners (Daloz, 1986).

Learners, too, play many sorts of roles in a lifetime: Transitions from one role to another involve social and psychological transition. Merriam (p. 7 of her draft)

describes the basic process used by Bridges (1980, 1988): "a transition begins with an ending. We separate from an old routine, role, relationship, assumption, or view of one's self.. .Endings lead to the second phase which he calls neutral zones. . . The third phase, beginnings, comes 'when the endings and the time of fallow neutrality are finished' (p. 17, Bridges)." The educator can facilitate development by providing support and challenges that stretch the learner's way of making meaning. Support for older women to discover themselves during and after middle age may come as learning activities, new directions, and increased opportunities for mature women to try new ventures.

Case Studies

Sister Murray

Recently, Sister Murray, age 55, discovered that she had been angry in a meeting where retirement housing was discussed. "I knew so much more than anyone there did but I didn't say so." When asked why, she responded. "I don't know. I just felt I couldn't talk." What Sister Murray meant was,

> I couldn't talk to *them*. Those were the people that knew me before I changed. I couldn't show them how much I had changed. I felt inadequate: the "new me" seemed too frail. I wanted to show them the "new me" that comes to class and has experienced the changes, the shifts. But I simply couldn't, and so I remained silent. The result was that I became angry.

Sister Murray had been ""socialized" to be docile–a prevailing attitude in her early days in the community of women religious. She found that, as she gained some confidence in her own thinking, the previous role (typically thought to be a gender role) no longer felt appropriate. To track her progress through Bridges' model discussed earlier (in Merriam's essay), we see that Sister Murray would no longer fit into her former role: that is clearly the experience of an **ending**. What has changed is her own view of herself, of the identity she has known in the presence of her community. Yet, she hasn't yet achieved the "new voice" and may be seen as holding in a **neutral zone.** The final stage of a new **beginning** may or may not be achieved. (One assumes that she will negotiate within this transition.) An indication of Sister Murray's success on reaching the new beginning will be an increase in authoritative "voice," a sense of comfort in taking a leadership role in her community, and possibly the satisfaction of seeing her creative ideas acknowledged.

Tom Anthony

Tom Anthony, age 38, was recently laid off from his job as a case-fitter at a large industrial plant. After three months of job search, he found himself despondent and edgy. His wife, a third grade teacher, continued to work and Tom contributed to the household by caring for the children and preparing meals. He came into the Learning Center one morning to ask about literacy lessons. "Believe it or not," he said, "I got through high school without really doing any work. I was good at sports and my teachers let me take home my tests." What he is experiencing is a new way of seeing himself: he knows he has to

change and is impelled toward a reconstruction of his former way of being, what had become his stable self.

What is shifting for Tom is his sense of himself as breadwinner, fully responsible for a family of five. This was the role his father had played during his own early family life. "It's just how I fell it ought to be," asserts Tom. Now he found himself working with elementary materials, grappling with reading and computing. Merriam (pp. 7 & 8 of this draft) refers to Knox's model and the 5 periods of adult transition: **prestructure, anticipation, actual change event, disorganization, poststructure**. In Tom's case, the **prestructure, anticipation, actual change event** have all occurred and what he is experiencing now is the phase of disorganization. His way of making meaning, of seeing himself, is in transition. He experiences the **disorganization of** a loss of the familiar structure of his life and the learning environment is his holding place where he can achieve and test out new growth. How he will fare depends on his ability to adapt and the ways in which the educational community might produce a favorable **poststructure** in helping him move to a productive workrole.

Yet growth is fully possible for Tom, for, what Merriam calls, "life event and role transitions characteristic of adult life" (p. 8) are unavoidable. What is essential in this story is the response of the educational community. Sisco (chapter two of this book) reviews several pivotal needs of the adult learner. He says that the learner needs "to know what the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations are of the education institution"; will question the curriculum or major; and experience a "sense of loss" when finished with the process. Although Sisco is addressing higher education, these

issues are nonetheless germane to Tom's process as learner. "What's hard," reflected Tom, "was when I had to be out for three weeks--my brother-in-law needed help with a roofing job--and the class moved on. I felt, like, 'geez, *work comes first*.' You know what I mean?" Tom's commitment to the learning process did not match the curricular mandate of continuity: this can be a common issue for adult learners. While Tom *wants* an education and knows that he needs to continue, his self-image as "man of the house" (agentic, instrumental) dictates that he downplay the shift in his new role. It has been especially hard for him to tolerate his wife Ann's mastery as "provider of the household," something that was not quite so apparent when they both were employed and contributing on a more equal footing.

Furthermore, Tom's experience of the learning process is affected by the ongoing need to balance the demands of the academic institution with his own. Currently, this is the most difficult period for him. Unless he can form an attachment to an instructor, reading group, set of classmates, or meaningful connection to content and new concepts, he may not manage to continue. These goals can be worked into the educational rubric with some ease once the community acknowledges their importance. If not, Tom may not reach Sisco's last stage of "moving out" and his transition will be aborted.

Suggested Curricular Offerings

Robert Havighust (1972) nearly 25 years ago declared that life patterns should include mixtures of work, learning and leisure. Indeed, we see that it is no less appropriate today. Further, traditional ordering--adult gets education, finds job,

marries, raises family, retires, dies--must give way to longer life cycles with several sequential careers or transitions. Included in the new tradition will be shifts from gender role characteristics. One aspect of the shift is that not all men "think like men," and not all women experience themselves as caregivers. Specific gender role characteristics require "reinvention of" areas that are highly personal and developmental. These will require adaptation to changes such as: the longer lifespan of women, changes in health care, shifting patterns of achievement and success in groups of young adults, and lifelong characteristics of friendship and partnering. Other issues may include learners' individual experience of:

- reworking notions of intimacy and autonomy;
- redefining characteristics of care (i.e., Gilligan, 1982) as an ethic of women's meaning-making;
- experiencing of relationship as orientation, including new and sometimes uncomfortable shifts in dependence;
- accepting the continual dilemmas of separation and attachment, particularly in terms of role reversals related to gender identity;
- shifting views of moral problems (male vs. female based on masculine patterns of instrumentalism vs. female patterns of expressive response) ;
- refocusing issues related to achievement and success.

Finally, it is to be remembered that gender identity is pivotal in self concept. To some extent, this phenomenon is related to cohort expectations. As historical and cultural patterns shift, generations experience new modes in gender roles. There may be changes in the nature of "male" and "female" styles within families that, in turn, impact on cultural expectations (Bee, 1996; Gutmann, 1987; Levinson, 1995).

Gender Shift and Opportunities

Curriculum to support developmental mandates for women might include: courses in tax returns, investments, business and travel; for men, experiences in story-telling and history, personal development and spiritual development; and for both, opportunities to be generative through mentoring, counseling, or pastoral ministry. Problem-centered gender shifts such as crisis-driven mandates or health concerns may require new skills and personal task orientation. These might include focused advocacy around medical treatment, increased pressure to assume home and family responsibilities (including caring for aged parents as Arsenault addresses in this text), and widow or widowhood.

Bee (1996) observes,

> It is useful to distinguish between *gender roles* and **gender stereotypes**. The former term describes what men and women actually do in a given culture in a given historical era; the latter usually refers to sets of shared, often quite inflexible, beliefs about what men and women *ought* to do, how they should behave, what traits they have. (p. 186)

For the adult educator, the creation of a gender-neutral learning environment is essential. Learners need to trust that their own growth will be supported, whether it be learning new family or work roles, personal development, or questioning the lives they have led previously. A necessary ingredient of transition is that it marks *leaving* one place and *heading for* another. It behooves the adult education community to provide safe transit.

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